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Experiential Learning: Teaching Research Methods with PhotoVoice

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Experiential Learning: Teaching Research Methods with PhotoVoice

Abstract
Despite of the emphasis on scientist-practitioner model and evidence-based practice, limited research knowledge and experience among counselors continues to be a concern. In an advanced research methods course, PhotoVoice was utilized as an experiential learning tool to facilitate student engagement as participants and researchers. Processes, successes and challenges are discussed.

Keywords
Counselor Education, Pedagogy, Research Methods, PhotoVoice

Research is an integral part of counselor education, yet the majority of peer-reviewed counseling articles from the past decade were non-empirical (Minton, Morris, & Yaites, 2014). In fact, research and program evaluation is one of the eight common core areas mandated by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP, 2009). Further, the American Counseling Association's (ACA) *Code of Ethics* underscores counselors' ethical responsibility to utilize current evidence-based practices that are theoretically sound and culturally appropriate to base their treatments and interventions (ACA, 2014). This means that different treatments for similar issues may differ drastically depending on a person's cultural milieu. This requires counseling professionals to be versatile in the approaches utilized to treat individuals, which further complicates matters in regard to how to best train counseling students to be competent consumers and producers of research (Dukic, 2015; Generali, Foss-Kelly, & McNamara, 2011; Wester & Borders, 2014).

The complexity of counseling requires the ability to exercise problem solving and decision-making (McAuliffe, 2011) while recognizing that individual experience informs one's reality. This complexity aligns with the constructivist paradigm, because the constructivist paradigm aims to understand how individuals understand their social world, which also requires researchers to engage in reflexivity. Thus, counselors actively engage in examining their knowledge, ideas, and beliefs, all of which are often influenced by one's sociopolitical context (Patton, 2015). We contend that the constructivist paradigm should be taught in research methods courses to support student application of knowledge. By doing so, students engage in reflexivity throughout the learning process while also exploring how others make sense of their reality. Herein, we review literature on the challenges faced within the counseling profession with regard to research competency. This is followed by a detailed presentation and discussion

of PhotoVoice (PV), which was used within the classroom to address the gap between practice and research.

The ACA (2014) and many counseling researchers have embraced the scientist-practitioner model, which promotes engagement in rigorous research to provide best practices to clients and advance the profession (Hays, 2010; Kitcheiner & Aderson, 2011; Thomas & Rosqvist, 2011). However, in order to appropriately consume and engage in research, counselors in training must learn about research methods. Doing so will equip counselors to produce scientific knowledge and critically analyze and evaluate scientific research findings to inform practice, develop effective interventions, and evaluate and enhance treatment and program outcomes (Thomas & Rosqvist, 2011).

Despite the emphasis on the scientist-practitioner model, the limited research competency among counselors is a persistent issue in the counseling profession (Borders, Wester, Fickling, & Adamson, 2014; Generali et al., 2011; Murray, 2009; Okech, Astramovich, Johnson, Hoskins, & Rubel, 2006; Wester, Borders, Boul, & Horton, 2013). For example, Okech et al. (2006) found that counselor educators in CACREP-accredited doctoral counselor education programs possessed varying levels of research training competence, which likely reflects the inconsistent and varied research training doctoral students receive. More recently, Borders et al. (2014) reported that there is a wide range of variation in terms of level, intensity, and quality of research training doctoral students receive. For example, Borders et al. (2014) found that among the 60.5% of programs sampled, counselor educators did not teach qualitative research methods content. Also the content focused more on historical methods instead of newer approaches to qualitative research. Thus, some counselors are better equipped with knowledge of research methods than others. In addition to knowledge of research

methods, doctoral level counselors must be competent in conducting research. Some CACREP-accredited doctoral program graduates fail to translate and apply research training to actual research activities as faculty. This may, in part, be due to insufficient hours of research training, inadequately designed and instructed research training courses or lack of faculty-student research mentoring (Borders et al, 2014; Lambie & Vacaro, 2011; Lee, Dewell, & Holmes, 2014; Okech, et al., 2006; Wester & Borders, 2014).

Varying levels of research competence among counselor educators who graduate from CACREP-accredited programs may also be due to variations in the implementation of the CACREP standards (Borders et al., 2014; Okech et al., 2006). For example, CACREP standards state doctoral students are expected to demonstrate their expertise through scholarly publications and presentations (CACREP, 2009, Section II, B.1), but one study found that less than one third of counselor education doctoral students published scholarly articles (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011). Counseling researchers contend that counseling students need to engage in research early in their program (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Rehfuss & Meyer, 2012), which may be achieved through consistent implementation of the CACREP research training standards.

Inadequately training counselor educators creates a cycle that inhibits the growth and potential of counseling research that informs practice. A content analysis of peer-reviewed counseling articles from the last decade revealed that over two-thirds were non-empirical (Minton, Morris, & Yaites, 2014). Further, the empirical articles lacked theoretical frameworks, utilized inappropriate research designs, had sampling errors, and relied on simple statistical analyses (Minton et al., 2014), all of which reflect low research competency among counselors and counselor educators. Given that counselors engage in research to inform practice, this lack

of research quality and competency among doctoral students and counselor educators is problematic.

Despite CACREP's (2009) assertion of the importance of counselor exposure to various research methods (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods), literature indicates a gross lack of qualitative research in counseling publications as well as counselor training research courses (Minton, et al., 2014; Borders et al., 2013). Lack of knowledge among counselors of various research paradigms and methods exacerbates the gap between research and practice. Further, counselors often feel that positivistic research is incongruent with counseling values (Lee et al., 2014; Thorpe, 2013), and training in qualitative and mixed methods research would alleviate this tension. Post-positivist research paradigms, like constructivism, provide counselors the opportunity to engage in knowledge production that is congruent with their counseling values (Berrios & Lucca, 2006; Huber & Savage, 2009; Lee et al., 2014; Reisetter et al., 2004). For example, counseling philosophies stress the importance of being able to understand and work within a client's sociopolitical context (Woo, Hensfield, & Choi, 2014). Research methods like PV, rooted in the constructivist paradigm, provide a mechanism for counselors to produce knowledge with clients/research participants grounded within their sociopolitical context with the goal of creating social action (Wang & Pies, 2004).

To address the gap between research and practice, the first author developed a research methods course that provided students with experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning involves students being directly involved with phenomena to translate material learned within a classroom to real life settings (Hoshmand, 2004). While counseling researchers acknowledge the potential benefits that students gain from engaging in experiential learning, there is limited research on incorporating experiential learning in the teaching of research

methods (Mobley & Davis, 2013; Rehfuss & Meyer, 2012). Thus, educators are tasked with the duty to explore the ways in which experiential learning can be integrated within courses to bolster research competency among students. Herein, we (the course instructor and two graduate students) reflect on the integration of a modified version of PV (Wang & Burris, 1997). PV was used to promote understanding of research methods in a course designed for doctoral level counseling students and master's level psychology students.

PhotoVoice

To our knowledge, there is no literature on the use of PV as a pedagogical tool for counseling research methods courses. There are a few publications on the use of PV in counseling research and counselor training where counselors have used PV with counseling students to develop empathic skills (Lenz & Sangganjanauvanich, 2013) or to explore doctoral student experiences with the comprehensive examination process (Koltz, Odegard, Provost, Smith, & Kleist, 2010).

Rooted within the constructivist paradigm, PV is a community-based participatory research method that involves individuals actively making meaning of the world around them (Wang & Burris, 1997). More specifically, individuals involved in the study engage as both participants and co- researchers to identify and describe their concerns to facilitate conversations about community issues to increase awareness and to take sociopolitical action (Wang & Burris, 1997). To identify concerns, community members take photographs of their everyday life to communicate their life experiences and perceptions. Photographs are then used to facilitate group discussion and action. PV is not rule bound; thus, participants can shape the PV process in a way that is meaningful to them. More specifically, participants take photographs of whatever they choose, and collectively, they direct the group discussion and

determine the way in which the photographs are used. PV raises awareness and encourages action through the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1972), which represents the conceptualization of one's sociopolitical context and the capacity to engage in individual and collective action to address inequality. Participants' sharing their own experiences helps create a context in which people learn to identify and understand how shared historical and social patterns impact their lives (Wang & Pies, 2004). Sharing one's story encourages participants to create narratives in reaction to dominant narratives that contribute to oppression (Rappaport, 1995). Thus, the discussions that emerge among participants enable them to actualize personal and community change. For example, the photographs may be disseminated to policy makers to help bring about the desired changes (Wang & Pies, 2004). For example, Wang and Pies (2004) worked with community members to understand concerns about family, maternal and child health. They disseminated their PV results with the State Maternal and Child Health agency, which helped the agency to expand its priorities to include the concerns of the community. While the specific changes vary based on the focus of each PV study, the goal typically focuses on second-order change, which addresses the causes that contribute to the problem of interest (Jason, 2013). Thus, within a counseling context, the change sought may concern social justice advocacy including, but not limited to, community mobilization and informing public policies.

While PV is more commonly used in community settings (Wang & Burris, 1997), it has also been translated into classroom settings (Choi & Fandt, 2007; Lichty, 2013; Mulder & Dull, 2014). PV facilitates engagement in the classroom where students become active participants in their own learning and development. As participants, individuals take photographs on a mutually agreed upon topic based on a theme or prompt that is determined in advance. The

theme or prompt is intended to serve as the research question for the study. For example, counseling students may be interested in conducting a needs assessment using PV with a local community to better address the community's needs. Within this context, students may work with community members to take pictures of barriers that need to be addressed as well as challenges that may be utilized to address the barriers. In addition to taking a photograph, participants generate a descriptive interpretation of their photograph. Then, participants come together to share and discuss their photographs and interpretations in a focus group. As co-researchers, participants work together to analyze the data and disseminate the research findings (Cook & Buck, 2010). As with other qualitative research, data can be analyzed in various ways (e.g., thematic analysis, narrative research), but the decision of how data is analyzed is based on how the researchers and participants want to represent their data.

PhotoVoice in an Advanced Research Methods Classroom

A modified version of PV was integrated into a graduate level research methods course, designed for doctoral level counseling students and master's level psychology students, at a teaching focused university in the Midwest. The purpose of incorporating PV into the research methods class was to teach students qualitative research methods by having them actively engaged in the research process. The aim of qualitative research is to learn about processes that involve learning about people's experiences and how they think and make meaning (Patton, 2015). Therefore, qualitative research approaches lend itself to participatory research methods like PV, which allow researchers and participants to learn from diverse perspectives. By participating in the process of PV, students were involved in the project as both a researcher and participant. According to Patton (2015), participants who engage in participatory research like PV learn and engage in evidence based inquiry where

they gain skills in “problem identification, criteria specification, and data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (p. 221). Therefore, students went through the entire research process where they learned how to generate a research question, collect data, analyze data, and write up their findings. Throughout the process, the entire class generated the research questions, and how they were answered and presented. Independently, students developed their own analytic framework to analyze and write up their findings.

Classroom demographics. All students enrolled in the Advanced Research Methods course, a semester-long class, were expected to participate in the PV process as part of the course requirement and were given credit for participation. However, the points awarded for participation were low; thus non-participation did not significantly impact student grades. Due to small cohort sizes within both the counseling and psychology programs and similar expectations of research knowledge and production, counseling doctoral students and psychology master's students complete the same research methods course. The classroom was made up of eight graduate students with half of the students in a counseling doctoral program and the remaining half in a psychology master’s program. The students in the CACREP accredited counseling doctoral program were training to earn the Doctor of Education in Counselor Education and Supervision and master’s students were enrolled in a Master of Arts in Psychology program. Notably, all students who were not licensed counselors intended to seek counseling licensure upon graduation.

Materials and procedures. PV was introduced to students on the first day of class as one of the areas in which students were to be evaluated. The introduction included presenting information on the history of PV, its various uses with sociopolitical minorities, and a rationale for why it was being used in class. Following the first class session, students were assigned to

read multiple articles that utilized PV in different contexts. Booth and Booth (2013) was one such article that introduces PV as a research method that is suited for diverse populations, including people with intellectual disabilities. In their study, PV was used with mothers with intellectual disability so that service providers better understood their lives, what is important to them, and to identify the shared priories among the women as a basis for group action. Students also learned about various research paradigms and their associated research methods (e.g., experiments, quasi-experiments). Throughout this initial process, students were encouraged to consider appropriate uses of each research method and its associated strengths and weaknesses.

Once students were provided with an overview of various research paradigms and research methods, the PV process began. Students went through the PV process three times during the course of the term. Each process was referred to as a cycle, which involved the following steps: (1) identify a research question (2) generate a photograph and interpretation, (3) discuss the photographs and interpretations in a group discussion, (4) transcribe group discussions, and (5) analyze qualitative data. Notably, the analysis overlapped with other steps, because students began the analysis after the first group discussion and continued to work with the data throughout the term. Each step within the PV cycle is detailed below.

For each PV cycle, students narrowed the aim of the cycle by generating a single research question to answer with one photograph and interpretation. To identify a single research question for each cycle, students brought potential research questions to class. Students discussed research questions to determine a single research question through consensus building. Students chose to generate broad research questions that would allow each of them to share information about their own lives. The research questions used for the three cycles focused on student experiences which were (1) What are my obstacles and barriers?, (2)

What obstacles have I inherited?, and (3) How do I make sense of my gender identity? Notably, the third research question was informed by numerous LGBTQ events held on campus during the semester. Throughout the course of the academic year, the university encourages instructors and student organizations to integrate issues of diversity to promote awareness in their work. During the course, the university invited an artist, whose work focused on LGBTQ issues, to exhibit his work and meet with students. The LGBTQ student organization co-hosted multiple events with other student organizations during the semester. Some students within the class were involved in the campus activities and they suggested focusing on a topic that relates to LGBTQ issues. The other students agreed and they discussed possible research questions until they all agreed upon "How do I make sense of my gender identity?" Students had approximately 7 to 14 days to answer the research questions through a photograph and interpretation, which were posted on the course Blackboard (2015) website. Blackboard (2015) is a course management system that offers an online platform for students and instructors to create virtual learning community. During the course, each student uploaded photographs and posted their interpretations of photographs in advance, which were available to other students to view and read prior to the class. Once photographs and interpretations were posted, student posts were visible to the entire class.

Students were allowed to take photographs of whatever they deemed appropriate with the exception of illegal activities and images that would identify people outside of the classroom setting. When students wanted to take a photograph of a person outside of the classroom, they took pictures that would not identify the individual. For example, one student took a photograph of a person's hand, which did not allow us to identify the subject of the photograph. The student's interpretation of the photograph described a barrier he experienced

and the role of his family in supporting him through the struggles. Another student shared a photograph of her mailbox. Her interpretation conveyed her struggles with racism, with a specific story about her mailbox being vandalized.

After each photograph and interpretation was due, students engaged in a group discussion to share their photographs and interpretations and to engage in dialogue and critical reflection with their peers. All photographs and interpretations were not discussed due to time restrictions, but typically two or three photographs and interpretations were discussed in a 90 to 120 minute time period. Students either volunteered to discuss their own photograph and interpretation or they identified a peer's photograph and interpretation that they wanted to discuss. Photographs and interpretations chosen for discussion were projected on a large screen. Students sat in a semi-circle to view the projector and each other. First, the chosen photograph was projected on a screen, and students were given the opportunity to view the picture for a few minutes and share initial insights. After the photograph was viewed, a student volunteered to read the associated interpretation. Then, the photographer provided additional context about his/her picture, which facilitated discussion among students. Students asked the photographer questions, shared their own interpretations, and shared their own life experiences in relation to the photograph and interpretation being discussed. For example, when discussing racism experienced by racial minorities, students first discussed racism in society generally but then moved to discussing their experiences with racism within the university setting. Some students shared related experiences with discrimination based on sexual orientation and disability status. However, after sharing their struggles after each group discussion, students shared resources and identified strengths that they possess that help them get through barriers.

During the group discussion, the first author served as the facilitator. During the first

focus group, student had to be probed by the facilitator, with questions asking for more information in regard to comments they raised. However, little to no probing was needed in future sessions. Students used field notes to document interesting areas for further exploration and clarification to be raised during the group discussion and note nonverbal expressions (Patton, 2015). Some students documented clarifying questions that were shared during the group meeting, but students most often documented nonverbal expressions. For example, students documented when they sensed others were uncomfortable by noting behaviors like lowered eye gaze. In some instances, students also documented their own reactions to the group discussion. Students specifically did this when their views differed from others in class. For example, when discussing gender identity, students who strongly opposed the LGBTQ community dominated the group discussion, while others documented how they felt in reaction to the prejudicial beliefs students felt comfortable sharing. After each focus group, students posted their field notes on Blackboard (2015). Thus, students could utilize their own field notes and retrieve other students' field notes to assist in data analysis.

All group discussions were audio recorded which were transcribed verbatim. Students took turns transcribing, but they all utilized Poland's (1995) process for transcribing. Transcribers listened to the audio recording while typing each word stated and sounds like sighs and pauses. Next, students reviewed each other's transcript while listening to the audio recording to ensure the transcript was accurate. Throughout the transcription process, students did not edit the verbatim accounts including alterations to sentence structure. All transcriptions were posted on Blackboard (2015) for all students to utilize during the analysis process.

During the course of the term, students learned about different types of qualitative analyses including thematic analysis. To analyze the data, students utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and coded data in Dedoose Version 5.0.11 (2014). Students were taught Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of analysis. Phase one involved students familiarizing themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the data and field notes. During the second phase, students generated initial codes. Once the data were initially coded, the third phase involved students searching for themes requiring them to broaden their focus of the data. Students considered how different codes might be combined or altered to form an overarching theme. They also reviewed their themes using Patton's (2015) criteria for internal and external homogeneity to ensure all themes were coherent with clear boundaries. During the fifth phase, themes were refined to then define and label the themes. The sixth phase involved producing a report of the results. Students completed the analysis independently but were encouraged to discuss their coding framework with their peers. Notably, all students were required to write a brief report that documented the PV process in APA style, which included all components of an empirical manuscript.

Integration of PV with other course concepts. While the PV process exclusively focused on qualitative research, students also learned about quantitative research approaches couched in various research paradigms. Early in the course, students learned about the similarities and differences between qualitative and quantitative research approaches, which were repeatedly highlighted throughout the course, particularly during the PV process. For example, students generated open-ended questions when determining the aim of the PV cycle, but in many instances they presented close-ended questions. This provided opportunities to discuss when close- and open-ended questions would be most appropriate. They also learned,

through practice, how qualitative and quantitative analyses differ. Throughout the term, students utilized the qualitative PV research method but were consistently engaging in a quantitative analysis of the data. More specifically, students wanted to count the number of times a particular word or phrase was used or the number of times a certain topic was discussed. By going through the PV transcripts as a class, students were able to discuss the richness of the data. Students who utilized a quantitative analysis shared their findings with the class, which were then compared to the qualitative findings. The comparison allowed students to learn how the process of analysis differs as well as the quality of the results. More specifically, the qualitative analysis yielded richer data on processes while the quantitative data presented a numerical representation of the number of times a word or phrase was used. This process also helped students think through instances where it would be appropriate to utilize a qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis and a mixed analysis.

Students also reflected on the PV process throughout the course. In addition to the PV process, students were required to independently propose a method and analysis plan for an original empirical research study. The doctoral students used the assignment to develop their doctoral capstone project while the master's students developed their thesis or a topic that would help them at their internship site. Students utilized their classroom experience to first determine their research paradigm while also considering their areas of interest. Most students initially wanted to align themselves with the constructivist paradigm. However, their initial shift toward constructivism was challenged when they wanted to utilize quantitative research methods that leaned toward the positivist paradigm. When forced to think independently about research, students began to grapple with their identity as researchers. However, it encouraged students to continue thinking about the PV process and other qualitative research methods so

that their research questions and paradigms were aligned with an appropriate research method.

Earlier in the course, students learned in detail about the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and what is required to successfully gain IRB approval for various types of research designs. Thus, we discussed how IRBs require researchers collecting data in group settings to convey to participants, in person and in the consent process, that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in group settings (Portland State University Institutional Review Board, n.d.). Students hoped that after only a few group meetings participants would feel comfortable with the group setting, allowing them to share sensitive information. However, they learned that certain topics, like LGBTQ issues, would likely require an extended period of time for participants to start to feel comfortable discussing their thoughts and experiences.

Challenges with PhotoVoice in the Classroom

Though PV was a positive experience for students, there were some challenges with the process. Early in the term, some master's and doctoral level students shared, during multiple class meetings, that they were anxious being in a research methods course and had little knowledge of why they were required to complete a research methods course. Counseling students viewed their program to be focused exclusively on practice, not research and generally grappled with the connection between practice and research. Students also felt disconnected from the instructor, a community psychologist, because the students wanted to become counselors; some students said that they identified psychology with research but not counseling. Relatedly, according to Lee et al. (2014), research and statistics courses are sometimes taught by non-counseling faculty, which indirectly communicates to students that research and statistics are not a part of the counselor identity. Throughout the course, students were reminded of the importance of research in counseling through examples of evidence-

based practices. Students may also have felt disconnected because they had not engaged in research before the class and the class was the last class they had to complete before completing their doctoral internship and capstone or master's level internship. Thus, they completed most of their degree without being exposed to research, which may implicitly convey that research is not important.

Another challenge that came up throughout the course concerned tension among students with differing opinions. For example, when discussing gender identity during one PV cycle, half of the classroom repeatedly stressed the importance of traditional gender roles while the other half reported feeling silenced. PV requires participants to open up to others in the group. However, if participants do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, the purpose of PV is lost. Thus, for maximum benefit, participants must engage in the PV process with a group that they felt comfortable sharing personal information with. At the time, attempts were made to discuss the Belmont Principle of Justice (US Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.) and one student stressed that ACA's 2014 Code of Ethics prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In future courses, the ACA's 2014 *Code of Ethics* will be included as required reading for students to refer to when engaging in discussion that involve sexual and gender minorities as well as other marginalized groups.

Conclusion

While research and program evaluation is one of the eight common core mandates of CACREP standards (CACREP, 2015), limited research experience among master's and doctoral students is an area of concern in the field, especially in regard to qualitative research (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Thus, future research should explore the impact of integrating post-

positivist paradigms, like the constructivist paradigm, on teaching research methods courses. When doing so, it may be beneficial to empirically compare outcomes between classes that utilize experiential learning like the PV process with research methods classes that do not. Tracking student research productivity from the time they take the research methods course to graduation may be one way to examine the outcomes of such a course. However, student engagement in research may heavily rely on faculty mentorship and competence with research. Therefore, training programs may also want to consider evaluating the research production of both its faculty and students including former students as one indicator of research competency. For programs in which both faculty and students do not engage in research, programs may consider encouraging or even requiring students to engage in research with faculty. This would likely be challenging given the various demands faculty and students already face, but programs should consider offering smaller class sizes for courses that integrate research engagement or course releases for faculty and course credit for students engaging in research for a community organization. Doing so would provide students real life experience with research that may enable them to competently consume research and conduct research independently.

We believe that the incorporation of experiential methods, particularly using research methods rooted in the constructivist paradigm, may alleviate the challenge of varied and sometimes limited knowledge of research among counselors. The constructivist paradigm better aligns with counseling values that stress context and diversity and thereby may be more accessible to students. Engaging in research during the course of a research methods class is one way to ensure that students gain knowledge and experience in research. Through the use of PV, master's and doctoral students engaged in the processes involved in a qualitative

research project as both participants and researchers. Documenting this process with our successes and challenges intends to continue discourse on strengthening the training of counselors.

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